GC 510 — Competitive Strategy & Game Theory for Capture (14-week syllabus)

The federal market is a game with published rules, a handful of players, and high stakes. This course gives you the strategic toolkit the undergraduate tier uses by instinct: position, commitment, coalitions, and the discipline of anticipating the other players. Game theory is the grammar; competitive strategy is the prose.

Course number: GC 510 · **Credits:** 3 · **Format:** 14 weeks, one 75-minute session per week (plus reading and a weekly written deliverable). **Audience:** Graduate students in the MS in Capture Management & Government Business Development. **Prerequisites:** GC 501 (microeconomics) or concurrent. Game theory is taught from zero — no prior formal game theory required. **Recommended companion:** GC 530 (research methods) — the competitive-strategy course builds hypotheses; the research course teaches you to test them. **Texts:** the doctrine and literacy folders of this repository; the course reader (seminal game-theory and strategy papers, all rendered at concept altitude). No software required — the course is stack-agnostic by design (doctrine/08).

Learning outcomes

By the end of this course, a student can:

- Read a competitive situation as a game: identify the players, the strategies, the payoffs, the sequence, and the information available to each.
- Use the core solution concepts — dominance, Nash equilibrium, and backward induction — to predict competitive behavior in a small field of bidders.
- Explain commitment and credibility: when a stated intent is a real strategic move and when it is cheap talk.
- Analyze incumbency as a strategic asset and choose among the canonical displacement plays — take the recompete, ghost the entrenched incumbent, team around the holder, pivot to white space, or walk.
- Distinguish a discriminator from a baseline feature, and design a capture strategy around claims competitors cannot credibly make.
- Model teaming as coalition formation: when to team, with whom, and on what terms.
- Set a pricing posture as a strategic position — premium, parity, aggressive, or price-disciplined — and explain the signal it sends to the customer and to competitors.
- Decide bid/no-bid as a portfolio game rather than a per-pursuit gamble.
- Respect the ethical and legal boundaries of competitive strategy: public-record facts only, no disparagement, no conflicts of interest.

Weekly schedule

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
1	Strategy is a position, not a wish	The capture mindset. Win strategy as a set of claims about the customer, the competition, and yourself. Discriminators vs. baseline features.	doctrine/03; doctrine/05; the capture doctrine at concept altitude	One-page position statement for a case pursuit: the customer's need, the competitive set, and the one claim you will make that no competitor can credibly make.
2	Game theory foundations	Normal-form games, players, strategies, payoffs. Dominance and dominated strategies. Nash equilibrium and why we predict it.	the course reader on game theory; doctrine/03 (pipeline as a game)	Worked exercise: model a two-bidder price competition as a normal-form game; find the dominant strategies.

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
3	Sequential games: commitment and credibility	Extensive-form games, backward induction, first-mover advantage. When a promise is a commitment and when it is cheap talk.	the course reader on sequential games	Short paper: identify a commitment move in a real capture campaign (e.g., a key-person hire, a teambuilding announcement, an investment) and analyze its credibility.
4	Competition among the few	Oligopoly reasoning: how a small field of bidders behaves. Reaction functions, competitive response, and the danger of overfitting to a rival.	doctrine/05; the course reader on oligopoly	Memo: for a real market segment, name the likely competitors and predict how each would react to an aggressive price play.
5	Incumbency as a strategic asset	Why incumbency is the highest-signal feature in capture. The anatomy of incumbency: relationships, knowledge, switching cost, past performance.	doctrine/07; the incumbency canon at concept altitude (bands from low to entrenched)	Incumbent analysis: profile the holder of a real (closed) contract. What is the source of its advantage? Where is it vulnerable?

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
6	Displacement plays	The canonical plays against an incumbent: take the recompete, ghost the entrenched, team around the holder, pivot to white space, walk. Choosing the play from the facts.	the displacement canon at concept altitude; doctrine/04	Decision memo: for a real recompete situation, choose the displacement play, state the facts that drive the choice, and the evidence that would change it.
7	Ghosting and positioning	Ghost themes as evaluation-relevant discriminators framed against the customer's stated requirements — never disparagement. What a ghost theme must cite to be credible.	doctrine/02; doctrine/05; the ghosting discipline at concept altitude	Draft a ghost-theme set for a case pursuit: three themes, each tied to a customer requirement and a public-record basis.

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
8	Coalition games: teaming as strategy	Teaming as coalition formation. When a competitor is also a teammate. The posture decision: prime solo, prime with subs, sub, JV, mentor-protege.	the teaming canon at concept altitude; doctrine/07	Teaming memo: for a case pursuit, run the gap analysis and recommend a posture with a partner-rubric defense.
9	Midterm	In-class examination: analyze a real, published competitive situation end-to-end — the game, the players, the position, the play.	(review weeks 1–8)	Midterm submission.

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
10	Price as a signal	Pricing posture as a strategic move. Premium, parity, aggressive, price-disciplined: what each signals to the customer and to competitors, and when each is rational.	doctrine/05; the pricing-strategy canon at concept altitude	Pricing-posture memo: recommend a posture for a case pursuit and predict the competitor reaction.
11	Pre-RFP shaping	The strategy that happens before the RFP drops: sources sought, RFIs, industry days, capability briefings. Shaping the requirement as a legitimate strategic move — and where the line is.	doctrine/02; the capture doctrine at concept altitude	Engagement plan: design a pre-RFP shaping campaign for a forecast opportunity, with the boundary of legitimate shaping stated.

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
12	Repeated games: reputation and the long term	The federal market as a repeated game. Reputation, trust, past performance, and the value of a credible delivery record. Why a firm that cheats the process loses more than the contract.	doctrine/07; the course reader on repeated games	Reflection paper: how does the repeated-game structure of the market change the optimal strategy of a small firm?
13	Portfolio strategy as game theory	Bid/no-bid as a portfolio decision. Capacity as the scarce resource; threshold discipline as an exercise price; the strategic value of saying no.	doctrine/03; doctrine/05; the bid/no-bid canon at concept altitude	Portfolio game: allocate a fixed capture budget across a scored opportunity set, treating each pursuit as a strategic bet with a competitive dimension.

Week	Theme	In-session (75 min)	Reading / material	Assignment due next week
14	Synthesis: the strategist's desk	The whole course in one frame: the capture strategist reads games, builds positions, forms coalitions, sets prices, and governs the portfolio. Final strategy defense before a skeptical panel.	(course synthesis)	Final strategy paper: "The competitive strategy of [your] pursuit," 2,500 words, defended in class.

Assessment summary

- **Weekly deliverables — 40%.** Each a concrete strategic artifact (a position statement, a game model, a displacement decision, a teaming memo).
- **Midterm — 25%.** In-class, real competitive-situation analysis.
- **Final strategy paper + defense — 25%.** A complete competitive strategy for a real pursuit or portfolio, defended before a panel that pushes back.
- **Participation and peer review — 10%.** Prepared, honest, useful contribution — the discipline the strategy room demands.

The graduate rubric

Criterion	Excellent	Proficient	Developing
Strategic reasoning	Models the game correctly and chooses a defensible strategy from the facts	Correct model, weaker strategy choice	Strategy asserted, not derived
Evidence discipline	Position and plays rest on public-record facts, stated explicitly	Mostly evidence-grounded	Relies on assumption or invention
Adversarial thinking	Anticipates competitor and customer response	Considers response at a surface level	Ignores the other players
Ethical boundary	Strategy stays clearly on the public-record side of the line	Boundary implied	Boundary unclear or crossed

Policies

- **Real markets, safe exercises.** We analyze real published competitions — never live ones, and never using non-public information.
- **Integrity.** Competitive strategy in this course is the art of the public record. Disparagement, fabrication, or strategy that depends on inside information fails the relevant assessment.
- **Late work.** An honest early warning beats a silent late submission.

The market is a game with published rules. The graduate strategist learns the rules, reads the other players, and plays a long game worth winning.